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Analyzing Teacher Strikes in Pennsylvania

Believe it or not, for the first time since the 1970s—as far back as reliable data is available—Pennsylvania might have just had its first school year without a teacher strike. There was an impasse in the Old Forge School District in Lackawanna County in the school year that concluded in June, but it is going to take the determination of some outside party to rule whether the work stoppage was a strike or a lockout.

We have written for many years as to how Pennsylvania is one of a small handful of states that permit teacher strikes. It allows collective bargaining for school employees along with 34 other states, but 22 of those forbid strikes as a way to settle bargaining disputes. And among the states in the “strikes allowed” category Pennsylvania in most years led the nation in strikes, even though there are states with more school districts and, presumably, more opportunities for strikes.

Our most recent full-length report looks at strike data from 1997-98 through 2012-13 in Pennsylvania. After eliminating strikes that occurred at technical/career centers and intermediate units, as well as those carried out by support staff, we found that there were 115 teacher strikes over the period. The high point was 2006-07 with 14 strikes while 2002-03 and 2005-06 each had more than a dozen strikes. All strikes over the time period occurred in 80 of the state’s 500 districts in 33 of the state’s 67 counties.

The data show district enrollment where the strikes took place. By taking that enrollment and multiplying it by the length of the strike, we were able to tally a measurement of “student days out of class”. For example, a ten day strike in a district with 1,000 pupils would result in 10,000 student days out of class. In districts with more than one strike over the time frame (either in the same year or separate years) we totaled the number of strike days and averaged enrollment counts to arrive at the student days out of class.

In cumulative terms, between 1997-98 and 2012-13 the total number of strike days was 1,177 and affected 311,674 pupils, resulting in 3,835,856 student days out of class due to strikes.

Moving from the big picture level to a more detailed analysis, we found that seven districts had strikes resulting in more than 100,000 student days out of class. The district

of Pennsbury (Bucks) had a 22 day strike in a district with more than 11,000 pupils totaling 253,924 student days out of class. Strikes in Bethel Park (Allegheny), Seneca Valley (Butler), and Central Dauphin (Dauphin) had between 170,000 and 199,999 student days out of class.

Twenty three districts had multiple strikes with the districts of Abington Heights and Old Forge (both in Lackawanna) having four strikes apiece. Eight others had three teacher strikes each and the remainder had two strikes each. The student days out of class ranged from 199,720 in Bethel Park (it had two strikes in the 16 year period lasting a total of 40 days and affecting close to 5,000 students) to 17,319 in Weatherly Area (Carbon). This latter district had three strikes: in total, the number of strike days was 23 and the average enrollment was 753.

We did further examination of the data based on regions of the state, dividing counties into six separate areas to focus on the data. Only one region—north central Pennsylvania—was spared a teacher strike over the time period.

We could not account for all the impacts from teacher strikes, from parents having to arrange for childcare and effects on education from loss of continuity to changes to plans families must make when a strike necessitates extending the school year well beyond the scheduled end date.

Taxpayers, students and parents might be unaware that this strike free year (if the Old Forge dispute is ruled a lockout) occurred even though the Legislature has not enacted a statute outlawing teacher strikes. There have been many attempts to take away the right to strike; none have come close to being successful. And that means the 2012-13 year was almost certainly an anomaly and probably won't be repeated. But it would be nice to think a new, strike free era has started.

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